

Nutrition Fact Sheet

Up-to-date nutrition information
for the health care professional

Nutrition Services for Children with Special Health Care Needs

Children with special health care needs are vulnerable to nutrition-related problems that jeopardize their nutritional status and pose barriers to their development. They require early screening to identify nutrition-related problems followed by assessment, appropriate intervention, ongoing follow-up, and coordination of nutrition care.

Definition

Children with special health care needs definition includes children ages birth to 21 years of age who have a long term, chronic physical, developmental, behavioral, or emotional illness or condition. The illness or condition:

- Is severe enough to restrict growth, development or ability to engage in usual activities.
- Has been or is likely to be present or persist for 12 months to lifelong.
- Is of sufficient complexity to require specialized health care, psychological or educational services of a type or amount beyond that required generally by children.

(According to national statistics, an estimated 15-18% of children in the U.S. are children with special health care needs.¹ Approximately 240,000 children in Wisconsin are children with special health care needs.)

American Dietetic Association Position Statement

Nutrition services are an essential component of comprehensive care for children with special health care needs. These nutrition services should be provided within a system of coordinated interdisciplinary services in a manner that is preventive, family centered, community based and culturally competent.²

Common Nutrition Problems

Several nutrition-related problems are of concern for children with special health care needs. As many as 40% of children with special health care needs have been estimated to be at risk for nutrition problems. Some programs have reported higher percentages, 92% of children who received nutrition screening in an early intervention program met at least one criterion for nutrition referral and 68% met two or more of the criteria.³

Common nutrition problems include:

- Alterations in growth:
failure to thrive, poor growth, poor weight gain, overweight and obesity
- Alterations in digestion, absorption, metabolism and excretion:
chronic constipation, diarrhea, loose stools and malabsorption
- Drug/nutrient interactions:
interference with growth, food intake, nutrient absorption and utilization
- Dental problems:
cavities, bruxism, malocclusion and gum hyperplasia
- Specific nutrient abnormalities:
certain medical conditions warrant taking a single-nutrient supplement or a multi-vitamin/mineral supplement
- Feeding problems:
inability or refusal to eat certain foods due to neuromotor dysfunction, structural defects and psychosocial factors
- Caregiver-related problems and/or concerns:
feeding experience is stressful, frustrating and feelings of inadequacy

Nutrition Services

Nutrition services include screening, assessment, intervention/treatment, nutrition counseling, care coordination and monitoring/reassessment. Children with special health care needs should be screened by a professional to identify nutrition-related problems such as inappropriate diet, feeding problems, alterations in growth, risk due to drug/nutrient interactions and caregiver-related problems and/or concerns.

When nutrition-related problems are identified, the child should be referred to a qualified Registered Dietitian (RD) to provide Medical Nutrition Therapy (MNT). MNT includes a comprehensive assessment of the child's nutritional status including analysis of medical and diet history, laboratory values, anthropometric measurements and feeding skills.

An individualized nutrition intervention plan is developed based on the RD's nutrition assessment and communicated to the child's primary care provider. The nutrition plan promotes a continuum of care among the child's primary care provider and other service providers to ensure a cohesive provision of nutrition services.

Nutrition goals and objectives should also be integrated into the child's Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP), Individual Education Plan (IEP), Individual Habilitation Plan (IHP) or Individual Service Plan (ISP) as appropriate.

The RD can also coordinate the acquisition of special infant formulas, medical foods, enteral nutrition products, nutritional supplements and multi-vitamin/mineral supplements.

References:

1. Newacheck PW, Taylor WR, Childhood chronic illness: prevalence, severity, and impact. Am J Public Health. 1992; 82:364-371
2. Position of The American Dietetic Association: Nutrition services for children with special health needs. J Am Diet Assoc. 1995; 95:809-812
3. Bayerl CT, et al, Nutrition issues of children in early intervention programs: primary care team approach. Sem. Pediatr Gastroenterol Nutr. 1993; 4:11-15

Benefits of Nutrition Services

Appropriate nutrition services provided by a RD may be the factor most critical for survival and has a positive impact on the health of children with special health care needs.

Benefits include:

- Improves overall health.
- Reduces the potentially debilitating effects of the child's conditions.
- Prevents further disability.
- Maximizes educational, vocational and social potential.
- Increases the level of independence the child is able to achieve.
- Improves the child's perception of self.
- Improves care-giver's perception of their ability to meet the child's needs.
- Contributes to a reduction in overall health care expenditures.

How to Locate a Registered Dietitian

Provision of Medical Nutrition Therapy for children with special health care needs with nutrition-related problems requires the expertise of a RD with specialized training and experience in developmental disabilities and chronic illnesses.

To assist you in locating a qualified RD in your local community, please:

- Refer to the "Directory of Dietitians Serving Children with Special Health Care Needs". To obtain a copy, please contact the CSHCN Nutrition Consultant (608) 267-9194
- Contact the Wisconsin Dietetic Association (888) 232-8631 or the American Dietetic Association (800) 366-1655.
- Contact your local WIC Program or Health Department.

For more information contact:

CSHCN Nutrition Consultant
Department of Health and Family Services
Division of Public Health, Nutrition Section
1 W. Wilson Street, Room 243
Madison, WI 53702-0007
Phone: (608) 267-9194
Fax: (608) 266-312

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